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Churchill: In Hoosick Falls, it's time for answers and truth

Chris Churchill

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Hoosick Falls residents rally at the Capitol to call for hearings on PFOA in June. The state Senate will hold a hearing on the water crisis Tuesday at Hoosick Falls High School. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times ... more

Hoosick Falls

Put yourself, for a moment, in [Rob Allen's](#) shoes.

If officials had treated the Hoosick Falls crisis with the urgency it deserved, if they had told everyone to immediately STOP DRINKING THE POISONED WATER, his 2-year-old girl wouldn't have ingested it for much of her short life.

They didn't, she did.

So you can bet your life that Allen will be closely watching Tuesday's state Senate hearing on the water crisis. This isn't some distant academic issue for his family. It's horribly real.

On Monday, I asked Allen what he's hoping to hear at the hearing, which starts at 10:30 a.m. in [Hoosick Falls High School](#), where he teaches music.

"I want to see how people answer for their actions," Allen said.

What Allen and most other residents of the village would like to hear, of course, is the truth. They want an honest understanding of how it was that some state and local officials knew the water was contaminated by a toxic chemical but didn't follow that knowledge up with immediate action.

The [Times Union](#) has reported that health and environmental officials were made aware of the PFOA contamination in August 2014 and presumably knew the toxin far exceeded the level considered safe by the federal government.

Yet what followed was 13 months of unconscionable dithering before residents were told that, you know, on second thought, maybe just maybe it would be best to, um, you know, stop drinking the water.

So yes, the truth about that delay would be nice.

But if nothing else, the water crisis has made Hoosick Falls villagers understandably cynical about government intentions. They've learned that many officials are interested, first and foremost, with protecting their own behinds. Truth is not the principal concern.

Allen, for one, says he's not getting his hopes up about what Tuesday's hearing will uncover because he's been disappointed before. The state commissioners of Health and Environmental Conservation are expected to testify, as is Hoosick Falls Mayor [David Borge](#).

"I'm not holding my breath over us getting answers," Allen told me. "I don't think getting answers is what the hearings are really about."

You may remember that few in state government actually wanted hearings on the crisis. Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#), a Democrat, and state Sen. Kathy Marchione, a Republican, were ready to move on. No additional discussion needed.

Because, you know, why embarrass anybody?

But when a committee of the [House of Representatives](#) declared that it would investigate, state officials were left with no choice. They couldn't let federal officials take the lead, so they grudgingly declared that they would also investigate.

Now they want us to believe that was their intention all along.

Marchione, in fact, will be among those sitting on Tuesday's panel and listening to testimony. Don't be surprised if "[Benedict Marchione](#)," as she's been dubbed by her fans in Hoosick Falls, gets an earful from some of the villagers who are scheduled to speak.

Allen will be among the speakers. When I talked to him Monday, he wasn't yet sure what he would say, although he certainly knows how he feels.

"They didn't treat us with dignity," Allen said. "They didn't listen to what we were saying."

Allen and his wife moved to Hoosick Falls when they were expecting their first child and wanted to be closer to family. He fell in love with the village and its charm.

Nine years and four children later, Allen still feels that way. Hoosick Falls is his family's home. But it's a community that has been betrayed, as he well knows.

Testing has shown that each of his children — three boys and a girl — have potentially dangerous levels of PFOA in their blood. His daughter had the highest level: 112 parts per billion, which is more than 60 times the national average.

What will that mean for the toddler's long-term health? Nobody can really know, and Allen and his wife must live with the worry. Again, put yourself in their shoes and imagine how you'd feel.

What's clear to me is that the girl's health was jeopardized unnecessarily. There's no justification for that. Excuses can only ring hollow.

I suspect that we'll hear justifications aplenty from the state and local officials scheduled to speak at the hearing. They'll probably attempt to make their Hoosick Falls decisions seem entirely reasonable and rational.

Will anyone use the hearing to take real responsibility? Will anybody step up and admit how badly government failed Rob Allen's little girl and so many others?

Or will we only hear more excuses?

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